

Attn:

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review Secretariat C50MA8

Department of Education, Skills and Employment

GPO Box 9880 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

5 July 2021

Submission to Quality ITE Review Discussion Paper June 2021

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review Discussion Paper.

The Review Discussion Paper constitutes an important step to understanding the current landscape of teacher education in Australia, building on previous reviews and taking action to recruit and retain the best teachers for our schools.

The submission is focused on Part A of the discussion paper 'Attracting and selecting high-quality candidates to the teaching profession. In particular, the submission has responded to the question raised in page 9, '**What can be done to attract career changers to the profession**'.

Contribution to the submission is informed by my research expertise in the area of career change teachers and research work been done in this space.¹ Please see Footnote in page 1 for references.

I am one of the handful of education researchers in Australia to have conducted a systematic research program on career change teachers. Through my thesis and subsequent research work, I have contributed to raising awareness of the commitment and expertise career changers bring to the profession and suggesting strategies for improving teacher education (TE) programs for this cohort. In August 2021, I will be commencing research to examine strategies and mechanisms to attract and retain career change teachers from STEM backgrounds in NSW schools (as part of a strategic priority grant funded by the NSW Department of Education). I am also currently writing a book on career change teachers, due to be published by Springer late 2021.

¹ a. Varadharajan, M. (2014). *Understanding the lived experiences of second career beginning teachers*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Technology Sydney]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10453/29255>
b. Varadharajan, M., Carter, D., Buchanan, J. & Schuck, S. 2016, *Understanding career change student teachers in teacher education programs*. A report prepared for Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Australia.
c. Varadharajan, M., & Schuck, S. (2017). Can Career Changers Be Game Changers? Policy, Research and Practice Concerning Career Changers. In J. Nuttall, A. Kostogriz, M. Jones, & J. Martin (Eds.), *Teacher Education Policy and Practice* (pp. 83–95). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4133-4_6
d. Varadharajan, M., Buchanan, J., & Schuck, S. (2018). Changing course: The paradox of the career change student-teacher. *Professional Development in Education*, 44(5), 738–749. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1423369>
e. Varadharajan, M., Buchanan, J., & Schuck, S. (2020). Navigating and negotiating: Career changers in teacher education programmes. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 48(5), 477–490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2019.1669136>

Background

An important focus of any teacher recruitment and retention policy should be about bringing diversity and experience to the classroom. As the world seeks to move beyond the crisis of COVID-19, flexibility, adaptability and agility are often discussed and are considered to be essential skills that better prepare learners of today to face an uncertain and evolving future. With present day classrooms being increasingly diverse, we need educators from different backgrounds, contexts and experiences who recognise the importance of ‘future preparedness’ in learning and education contexts. One such group of educators are career change teachers. As individuals who come from different walks of life, possessing diverse skills and experiences, career change teachers have the potential to make unique and significant contributions to student learning and engagement in and beyond school.

What we know about career changers’ entering teaching

Career changers are likely to have a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motives for entering the profession. Research shows that because of their skill set and experiences and having made a conscious and purposeful decision to enter teaching, they are highly committed, keener to share their passion and pass their real-world experience and expertise to students. Apart from content expertise and practical knowledge that are highly relevant to student teaching, qualities such as maturity, wisdom, resilience, flexibility, responsiveness to change and other skills gathered through years of life experience can also be attributed to career changers. Our research further indicates that career changers are keen for recognition and acknowledgement of their career and life experience.

Career changers are also more likely to have family and financial responsibilities than their school leaving counterparts. Chances are that many will enter the profession at a considerably lower pay base than was the case in their previous work. In addition, culture shock is not uncommon among career changers as they adjust to the working life and associated challenges of transitioning to being a teacher. Just like any other beginning teacher, they require training and support in various aspects including teaching practices, pedagogy and the machinations of running a classroom.

What can be done to attract career changers to the teaching profession

Solutions are proposed at various levels where potential change can happen. It is important to note the role of partnership. Education stakeholders (Government, policy makers, education providers, principals and teachers) need to collaborate together to come up with solutions that are feasible and sustainable.

1. **Teacher education or course providers:** Take steps to make the transition for career changers easier and smoother by:
 - Utilising suitable and uniform selection criteria to identify career changers and track their work, life and other experiences, for example, through personal statements and interviews.
 - Offering flexible options for career changers to complete their teacher education course.
 - ✓ Hybrid options for course attendance wherever possible.
 - Providing monetary and other assistance to attract and retain career changers’
 - ✓ Financial compensation for loss of income, particularly during professional experience placement
 - ✓ Incentives can be in the form of scholarships, especially to attract those from specialist backgrounds such as STEM.

- Providing opportunities for career change pre-service teachers to contribute meaningfully in course delivery, lesson content, and theory-practice application where relevant.
 - Adapting or tailoring courses or content for career changers, taking into account their prior knowledge.
 - Identifying career changers' unique needs while recognising career changers experiences and expertise where appropriate in their journey as a teacher education student.
 - Communicating and sharing key aspects of teachers' role and what it involves to better prepare and manage expectations of prospective career change teachers.
2. **Career change teachers in schools:** Identify and reach out to current career change teachers in schools to:
- Seek their assistance in devising strategies to attract more career changers. For example, utilise their past contacts and industry networks to contact interested individuals who are considering teaching as a career.
 - Hear their perspectives on some of the barriers that exist to attract and retain more career changers, who drops out and why.
3. **Schools:** Take steps to make schools an attractive place for career change teachers by:
- Increasing understanding about career change teachers: their motives, experiences and challenges, thereby enabling schools to better recognise and utilise prior experiences appropriately.
 - Creating conducive environment for career change teachers to thrive in their role, for instance, through tailored mentoring and professional development.
 - Being open to career changers' ideas, suggestions and teaching practices that link past experiences with current teaching role.
 - Considering alternative teaching options that may suit career changers, such as job sharing or team teaching with ex-colleagues.
 - Offering leadership or senior executive opportunities where appropriate to utilise career changers' managerial strengths.
 - Providing opportunities for career changers to interact and build relationships with other career change teachers in other schools in the area/region.
4. **Education Departments or recruitment agencies:** Take steps to attract more career change teachers in the public school system by:
- Simplifying processes and systems around applications and recruitment.
 - Removing unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and barriers that can cause frustration amongst career change teachers keen to enter the profession.
5. **Government and stakeholders:** Shifting public' perceptions by:
- Valuing the profession
 - Respecting teachers' roles and responsibilities
 - Promoting teaching as an attractive career
 - Working with peak industry bodies and education stakeholders to incentivise career changers.

I once again thank the Department of Education, Skills and Employment for providing the opportunity to write a submission, as part of the Quality ITE Review Discussion Paper.

Your sincerely,

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